

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 155 815

EA 010 700

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TITLE Perceived and Desired Roles of a State Education Agency.
PUB DATE Mar 78
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Toronto, Ontario, March 27-31, 1978)
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Personnel; *Agency Role; Elementary Secondary Education; *Needs Assessment; Questionnaires; *Role Perception; *School Personnel; *State Departments of Education; State School District Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Iowa

ABSTRACT

Findings are reported of data gathered from state education agency staff members and from constituents as to the perceived and desired roles of the agency. The study was based on the assumption that the perceptions were, of themselves, useful information. The major emphasis was on gathering and analyzing perceptions with only secondary emphasis given to validating the perceptions of the respondents. The second part of the paper addresses the background of the study and its failure to have meaningful impact on the agency in which it was conducted.
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PERCEIVED AND DESIRED ROLES OF A STATE EDUCATION AGENCY

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association annual meeting, March, 1978, Toronto, Canada

Printed and Produced in the United States of America

This paper is based in part on The Iowa State Department of Public Instruction Role Perception Study, produced at the Department of Public Instruction, Grimes State Office Building, Des Moines, Iowa. Copies of the complete study are available through the Department and through the ERIC document service.

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Perceived and Desired Roles of a State Education Agency

by Barbara Brittingham, University of Rhode Island and
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Introduction - This paper is organized into two parts. The first part describes a role perception study conducted in the Planning, Research and Evaluation unit of the Iowa Department of Public Instruction. The second part, subtitled "Needs Assessment for Whom?" addresses the background of the study and the failure of the study to have meaningful impact on the state education agency in which it was conducted.

The Study - The purpose of the study was to gather data from SEA staff and constituents as to the perceived and desired roles of the agency; the data were gathered in such a way as to provide information which would be useful to administrators and policy makers within the agency about how people from within and without the SEA saw the institution functioning and the roles they were hopeful that it would undertake in the future.

The study was, by some definitions, a needs assessment. It was based on the assumption that the perceptions were, of themselves, useful information. The major emphasis was on gathering and analyzing perceptions with only secondary emphasis given to validating the perceptions of the respondents.

We began the study by reviewing the literature, seeking statements from experts on the required and desired roles of state education agencies, and also examining the descriptions and results of earlier studies. This review gave us some suggestions for possible theoretical frameworks with which we might organize our results and also some suggestions for possible items we might use in our survey instrument.

The items for our instrument came from a variety of sources. We sent letters of inquiry, signed by the chief state school officer, to 106 agencies

and groups within the state asking them for suggestions; forty-seven groups responded to our inquiry. We also interviewed four key state legislators, reviewed key internal documents of the agency, and sent a memorandum requesting suggestions to all of the professional staff of the agency. Also, as mentioned above, theoretical and applied material from the literature provided several useful suggestions.

Our final instrument included two types of items. The first type of item represented attitudinal statements about the functioning of the SEA. Two sample items are: "The DPI provides effective coordination among various educational institutions" and "The DPI gives too little service to local schools". Items of the second type represented possible tasks that the DPI might undertake; some items were chosen to represent tasks we felt the agency was already engaged in; other tasks represented possible directions for the future. Our final instrument contained 42 attitudinal items and 52 task items.

Responses to the attitudinal statements were on an eleven-point agree-disagree scale of the type developed by Warren et al^a. Respondents were asked to mark each task item along two dimensions; the degree to which they agreed or disagreed that the agency was already conducting the task and the degree to which they agreed or disagreed that the task was something that the agency should be doing. Responses on both dimensions were also on the eleven point scale.

We had originally planned to send the instrument to teachers and school board members as well as administrators and service personnel from elementary and secondary schools; personnel from county units; and personnel from the two-year community colleges which are also served by the SEA in Iowa. When we

^aWarren, Richard D., Gerald Klonglan and Medhat M. Sabri, The Certainty Method: Its Application and Usefulness in Developing Empirical Measures in Social Sciences. Rural Sociology Report No. 82, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, 1969.

pre-tested the instrument, however, the low return rate from teachers and school board members along with the comments made by some of those who did return the instrument led us to conclude that, in general, members of those two groups were not well enough informed about the DPI to express meaningful attitudes on the instrument.

The final instrument, with a cover letter signed by the chief state school officers, was sent to a total of 996 educators from Iowa. The sample included administrators and consultants from within the DPI; a random sample of administrators and service personnel from the 452 public school districts; administrators from the county units; and administrators from the two-year community colleges.

The overall return rate for the survey instrument was 68 percent. The estimated internal consistency reliability of the attitude scale was .92. Neither the theoretical literature nor empirical examination of the results provided a useful way to group the items from the task portion of the survey; results from the task statements were therefore analyzed on an item-by-item basis.

The discussion of the findings is limited to the public school personnel and the SEA personnel since those two groups are the most common among SEA considerations in various states.

Results from the Attitude Items - A principal components factor analysis with a varimax rotation revealed that the attitude items formed only one major factor. Therefore, the analysis of the responses focused on total score and an examination of responses to individual items.

There was no significant difference between the overall mean attitude response from DPI and public school respondents; both groups expressed an attitude which might be characterized, on the average, as mildly positive toward the agency.

The analysis of responses to individual items showed interesting variations in attitudes between the two groups. The analyses indicate that DPI respondents, in general, tend to disagree more with each other on these responses than do public school respondents.

For seven of the 42 items there was more than a two-point difference in average responses of DPI staff and public school respondents. Public school respondents were more likely to think that the DPI does a good job of informing the lay public about educational issues, that DPI staff speak out about controversial issues regardless of the consequences, that people within the Department are aware of operations in other divisions, and that the DPI operates on the basis of a clearly defined set of priorities. Public school respondents were also more likely to say that the activities of the DPI reflect careful attention to systematic planning and that one always knows what information DPI reports require and when they are due. On the other hand, DPI staff were more likely to say that DPI personnel making recommendations to local districts have a good understanding of conditions in those districts.

DPI staff were most critical of the agency's operation on items relating to speaking out about controversial issues, internal communication, a perceived lack of clearly defined priorities in DPI operations, and the lack of awareness among school people of services offered by the DPI. Public school respondents expressed the most negative attitudes toward DPI operations in the areas of internal DPI communications, the inadequate amount of time DPI staff spend working with people in local schools, and the lack of awareness on the part of school people about services offered by the DPI.

The items on which DPI staff responses were most positive reflected a belief that the DPI does more good than harm and that eliminating most of the DPI activities would be of some harm to education. Public school respondents also responded quite positively to these items and indicated that, in general,

DPI staff are informed about current issues in education and provide current comprehensive and valid information.

Item standard deviations were examined to determine the items for which there was the largest amount of variation in responses. The greatest amount of disagreement among DPI staff appeared on items relating to whether the agency favors some schools over others, whether the DPI gives too little service to local schools, and whether the DPI is "more concerned with regulating local schools than with providing leadership".

For public school respondents, the largest standard deviations were for items concerning the amount of DPI favoritism shown to certain schools, whether educators naturally turn to the DPI in seeking solutions to their problems and whether most school people are aware of the services offered by the DPI.

Results from the Task Items - We began with the assumption that the most useful way to analyze the responses to the task items would be to separate the items into groups which included those tasks the agency was involved in and those tasks the agency was not currently involved in. Our chosen method of validating DPI involvement was to select tasks for which there was strong agreement among DPI staff as to whether or not the agency was currently involved in the activity. Unfortunately we did not find sufficient agreement among DPI staff as to which activities were currently underway to proceed with this plan. We arbitrarily decided that if 65 percent of the DPI staff reported a belief that the agency was involved in an activity we would include that activity as a current function of the agency, and that if 65 percent of the staff reported that the activity was not currently taking place, we would list that as an activity in which the agency was not involved. We found too little agreement among the staff to proceed with this plan. Of the 52 task items, we found only 12 that met these criteria, six in each direction. Further, we found ten

additional items for which there were strongly divided opinions as to the current DPI involvement. For these ten items, 35 percent or more of the staff agreed that the DPI was involved in the activity and 35 percent or more indicated a belief that the DPI was not then involved in that activity. It appeared to us that the problem went beyond any possible confusion resulting from the wording of the item. For example, one of the tasks was, "Involve educators, citizens and students in the formulation of goals for education in Iowa". Forty-three percent of DPI respondents reported that the agency was currently involved in this activity; forty-five percent indicated that it was not. Only twelve percent were uncertain.

Among the public school respondents, we found that there was a significant difference in the direction of wanting more involvement than was currently perceived for 51 of the 52 items. The single exception was the task of temporarily taking over the operation of a local district with unresolved difficulties.

For public school respondents, we correlated attitude toward the DPI with their response to each task on each dimension of response. We found that in about half of the cases (27 out of 52 tasks), that respondents with a more positive attitude toward the institution were more likely to think that the agency was now engaged in a particular task. On the other dimension we found that for 45 of the 52 tasks, respondents with a more positive attitude were more likely to want future DPI involvement in a particular area. The exceptions were generally tasks that were heavily regulatory in nature. For example, we found no significant relationship between attitude toward the DPI and a desire to have the agency implement a state-controlled curriculum in the schools. In general, a positive attitude was associated with wanting the agency to undertake leadership-type tasks, for example, ones that helped examine school finance or brought technical expertise in the form of research and evaluation skills to the local district.

Interestingly, many of the ten items on which DPI staff could not agree about current involvement were among the items with the largest differences between perceived current activity and desired activity.

The results of these and other analyses were described in the final report. In addition, we prepared and distributed a brief, non-technical executive summary of our findings.

Outcomes of the Study: Needs Assessment for Whom? - A needs assessment is potentially one of the most valuable evaluation activities an institution can undertake. If it is carefully designed and executed, a needs assessment can provide decision makers with information about how its programs and activities are perceived by its constituents.

Based on our own, admittedly biased, perceptions and the feedback we received from others who reviewed the study, we had reason to believe that our role perception study did a better than satisfactory job of meeting technical criteria for providing useful information. We reviewed the literature; we sought and received the verbal support of administrators up to and including the chief state school officer; we employed two statistical consultants who helped us in the design and analysis of the study; we had a reasonably good return rate on our instrument; and we prepared a concise and non-technical executive summary.

But the results were never used within the agency. Perhaps a small amount of institutional history will help explain why. The study was conducted through the Planning, Research and Evaluation unit of the state agency. The unit was relatively new, about three years old at the time of the study. Its mission had never been clearly defined. It has and continues to have responsibility for the ESEA Title III (now Title IV) innovative and exemplary projects; and it undertook some statewide assessment activities. But beyond those duties, its role in the agency was never clearly defined. Was it to be a research unit for internal

purposes, conducting institutional research and helping personnel in other units address their research, planning and evaluation activities? Or was it to be a service unit, performing planning, research and evaluation studies for schools and other educational agencies? We didn't know. Someone or some group of people never made the decision.

The project seemed timely. As we began the study, we were about to welcome a new chief state school officer who seemed receptive to the type of activity we undertook. Indeed he signed three of the cover letters that accompanied our various mailings, having joined the staff after the planning efforts for the project. He wrote a foreword to the printed report in which he indicated support for feedback and evaluation information of the type provided in the document.

Why was the study not used? Perhaps the confusion over the role of the Planning, Research and Evaluation unit was a contributing factor. Perhaps the new state superintendent was overwhelmed with information upon arriving at the agency and could not attend to the non-crucial nature of the information we provided. Perhaps the associate superintendents, not feeling that the study came out of their own needs, found the results easy to ignore. Perhaps the information was not as timely or potentially useful as we thought it was. Our own speculation is that the people in a position to use the information, for whatever reason, did not feel that the study came out of their own need to know. It was someone else's project.

The project failed to meet its primary objective of providing useful information to decision makers because we began by assessing needs outside the institution and not those from within.